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ABSTRACT

The author offers two controversial criticisms of what are rapidly becoming standard assessment procedures for the measurement of empathic skill. First, he asserts that assessment procedures which attend exclusively to the accuracy with which subjects are able to characterize other people's feelings provide little or no useful information about the process of empathic understanding. Second, he takes issue with those investigators who insist that empathy be defined as an interaction between discrete cognitive and affective responses, and argues that assessment procedures which require that subjects share, as well as understand, the feelings of others hopelessly confuse the processes of empathy and projection, and logically exclude the possibility of achieving an unambiguous index of empathic skill. In order to defend these claims, the author first characterizes the principal ingredients of the most current measures of empathic ability, describes what he feels are the major limitations of these procedures, and explicates specific corrective measures. (Author/PC)

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Accurate and Accidental Empathy*

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Accurate and Accidental Empathy

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Seven or eight minutes is very little time in which to say anything worth listening to about something so complex as empathy. It is my intention to use this limited time to offer two brief, but I think highly controversial criticisms of what are rapidly becoming standard assessment procedures for the measurement of empathic skill. First, I will attempt to persuade you that assessment procedures which attend exclusively to the accuracy with which subjects are able to characterize other people's feelings provide little or no useful information about the process of empathic understanding. Second, I would like to take issue with those investigators who insist that empathy be defined as an interaction between discrete cognitive and affective responses, and argue that assessment procedures which require that subjects share, as well as understand, the feelings of others hopelessly confuse the processes of empathy and projection and logically exclude the possibility of achieving an unambiguous index of empathic skill.

In order to defend these militant claims I would like first to begin by characterizing what seem to be the principal ingredients of most current measures of empathic ability, to then indicate what I feel to be the major limitations of these procedures, and finally, to describe what are intended as correctives to certain of these presumed shortcomings.

Temporarily setting aside minor procedural differences and variations in modes of stimulus delivery, developmental studies of empathic ability have most commonly involved the presentation of brief caricatures of social interactional themes which are calculated to move the principal stimulus characters toward some inevitable and highly stereotypic emotional reaction. With one or two exceptions (Burns & Cavey, 1956; Greenspan, Barenboim & Chandler, 1974), most of these studies have employed stimulus materials involving a redundant assemblage of contextual,

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thematic and expressive cues, all of which point in unison to the same inescapable emotional conclusion. The task of the subjects is to consider these materials and to indicate, through some verbal or behavioral reporting channel, what they assume the story characters are or ought to be feeling. In addition, subjects are sometimes required to indicate what their own reaction might be should they find themselves trapped in a comparable situation (Feshbach & Roe, 1968) or to describe their own current feelings after having learned of the plight of these story characters (Mood, Jonson, & Shantz, 1973). Empathic skill is then commonly defined as either: 1) the ability to recognize or anticipate what these story characters are or ought to be feeling; or 2) the ability to make such judgments, coupled with a willingness to anticipate or lay current claim to related feelings of one's own.

I would like to take separate issue with each of these assessment strategies and scoring criterion and to convince you that a great deal more care and planning is required if we are to say anything with certainty about the development of empathic understanding.

Although the two criticisms which I will sketch out are, to a certain extent, independent, both hinge on the fact that people are so frequently right for the wrong reasons that being right about another person's feelings really tells us very little. Although the concept of empathy has been taken to mean a great variety of different things, no one, to my knowledge, has ever seriously proposed that the term ought to be used to characterize those situations in which persons are sometimes inadvertently right or stumble onto the truth about other people's feelings by accident.

The assertion that data concerning the accuracy with which subjects are able to judge the feeling states of others provides no conclusive information about the process of empathic understanding is based on the general principle that identical conclusions often can be arrived at by any one of a great variety of different inferential routes. This is particularly the case with assessment

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procedures, such as those commonly in use in the empathy literature, which provide a series of highly congruent contextual, thematic and expressive cues, all of which, taken individually, redundantly prescribe the same affective response. Investigators who employ such internally consistent stimulus packages, and who monitor only the summarial judgments of their subjects, consequently, cannot distinguish between simple univariate solutions in which supposedly empathic judgments are based on attention to single cues, and more sophisticated, decentered inference strategies which consider and coordinate multiple cues. This problem is additionally complicated by the fact that one of the cues potentially available to the subjects of such research is their own real or anticipated emotional reaction to the events portrayed. To the extent that the contextual demands inherent in the stimulus situations chosen are so compelling and the affective responses demanded so routine as to be inescapable, a subject could create the impression of successfully monitoring someone else's emotions by simply noting what he or she might feel in that situation and offering this self-referential statement as a fortuitously correct estimate of the feelings of others. This appearance of empathic skill could, as the research of Burns and Carey (1957) demonstrates, proceed just as well with or without the presence of a target character at all. Any proposed measure of empathic skill which is not dependent on a direct knowledge of other people, and which does not permit a distinction to be drawn between the projection of one's own feelings and the accurate understanding of someone else's would seem to seriously pervert the usual meaning of the term empathy and to hopelessly confuse it with one of the few things from which it should be clearly distinguished. The projection of one's own feelings onto others is, by most standards, the exact opposite of legitimate empathic understanding and a procedure which confuses the two is called into serious question.

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The second criticism of current research in empathic understanding which I would like to offer especially applies to those studies (i.e., Feshback, 1973; Hoffman, 1974; Iannotti & Mecham, 1974; Mood, Johnson & Shantz, 1973) in which empathy is regarded as more than a cognitive response, and is assumed to imply a feeling for or with, as well as an understanding of other people's emotional experiences. According to this view, empathy defined without reference to the affective experiences of the observer "misrepresents empathy as no more than the sum of its cognitive components (Iannotti & Meacham, 1974)" and "has little theoretical utility beyond that contributed by the cognitive functions themselves (Feshback, 1973, p. 1).

Investigators who insist that empathy involves a kind of emotional sharing typically have attempted to secure some reading of their subjects' own real or anticipated affective reactions to the stimulus situations presented and have sought to determine the degree of match between these feeling states and those of the stimulus persons presented.

In the original Feshback and Roe (1968) study, subjects were shown, for example, a series of slide sequences depicting stimulus characters engaged in a variety of emotionally-charged interactions. Although a separate inquiry was made to establish the fact that these subjects correctly understood the emotional reactions of the story characters, primary attention was directed toward the self-reports of these first-grade subjects regarding their own emotional reaction to the stimulus materials. Empathy was scored whenever the self-defined feeling states of the subjects matched those which might reasonably be ascribed to the story characters. The related research of Mood, Johnson and Shantz (1973) similarly investigated developmental changes in the empathic abilities of three- through five-year-old children utilizing a series of verbally-told stories in which the central characters were portrayed as undergoing a variety of different emotions. In contrast to the studies of Feshback and her colleagues, however, Mood, Johnson and Shantz took as evidence of empathy only those responses in which subjects both correctly identified the

feelings of the story characters and claimed to share in these emotions.

Several important procedural, as well as conceptual, difficulties seriously complicate the interpretation of these findings. First, as Greenspan (1974) has pointed out, the repeated inquiry into how subjects feel following the presentation of each of a series of stories or slides contains certain elements of the absurd and creates demand characteristics, the effects of which cannot be calculated. Second, even if one can imagine that children's emotions go through the kinds of kaleidoscopic changes which these procedures seem to demand, there is no guarantee that these young persons are capable of accurately reporting on these rapid fluctuations in their own subjective experience. Third, the bold strokes in which the affective experiences of the story characters are painted easily permit a kind of stereotypic accuracy which only vaguely resembles the kinds of affect monitoring which people usually have in mind when they speak of empathic skill. Finally, the requirement that empathy be scored only in those circumstances in which there is a match between the feeling states of subject and object again makes no provision for distinguishing between empathy and projection. As Feshback (1973) has pointed out "both projection and empathy entail a sharing of emotional attributes between subject and object and appear to be affected by similar parameters. . ." (Feshback, 1973, p. 2). The direction and sequencing of these reactions is, however, assumed by Feshback to be different, with the emotional reaction of the subject preceding that of the object in the case of projection, and following that of the object in the case of empathy. The rub is that there tends to be a simultaneity about what one comes to know and feel and the sequencing of events required is typically not established. Nothing in the assessment strategies employed by either Feshback,or by Mood, Johnson and Shantz, for example, make any provision for establishing the direction or sequence of these supposed affective and cognitive reactions. If feeling and knowing are regarded as separate events, and their order of occurrence

cannot be established, then any match which is observed between those feelings which subjects claim for themselves and those which they ascribe to others could just as easily be the result of an egocentric projection as a post hoc emotional reaction to some prior understanding of another person's fate. Because of the frequent coincidence of human emotions the egocentric attribution of one's own feelings to others often results in conclusions which are inadvertently correct and which can not be distinguished from conclusions which are right for the right reasons. This indeterminance is not a procedural quirk which can be made to disappear through clever methodological gymnastic, but is an inherent part of any definition which makes a sharp distinction between knowing and feeling and insists that they occur in that order. Being right about another person's feelings for the wrong reasons has, however, never been seriously proposed as a criterion for empathic understanding and any procedure which cannot distinguish empathy from those instances of stereotypic accuracy which often characterize projective attributions is, consequently, difficult to defend.

This problem stems, in part, from the "divide and conquer" strategy inherent in the sharp distinction which these theorists make between knowing about someone and feeling along with that person. The intellectual appreciation of and the feelings which people have for one another seem to be regarded by these investigators as isolated elements which only sometimes interact to generate a synthesis of thought and feeling. Such"attempts to divide anything into two should," according to C. P. Snow (1959), p. 9), "be regarded with much suspicion." While it is possible to imagine raw feelings with no conceptual content, or strict understanding devoid of any feeling tone, such thoughts and feelings in pure culture are probably only analytic artifacts, rarely, if ever, represented in the world of real events.

If, in contrast to this somewhat piecemeal approach to the understanding of personality orgainization, one adopts a less fractionated view of the sort pro-

posed by Piaget (1970), then thoughts and feelings cease to represent isolated elements which sometimes do and sometimes do not interact. Instead, individuals are presumed to be moved and changed by their interactions with the environment in more wholistic ways. Rather than regarding the natural synthesis of these isolatable elements as the by-product of an occasional coming together of separable parts, their interaction is seen, in this view, as the normal state of affairs and pure cognitive or pure affective acts are regarded as myths of conceptual convenience. From this perspective the attempts on the part of certain investigators (Hoffman, 1974; Feshback, 1973) to decompose empathic responses into separable affective and cognitive components seem mistakenly analytic and unnecessarily piecemeal. A genuine understanding of the pleasure or distress of others is, in this view, assumed to be an automatic occasion for a flow of counterpart feelings and need not be separately antimated by the infusion of some second and independent dimension of affective experience. As such, the individual who remains affectively neutral in the face of another person's distress is not regarded as having fully understood the situation while himself remaining touched emotionally, but, is seen instead as a person whose efforts at understanding are necessarily superficial and incomplete.

For the reasons just outlined, much of the research concerned with developmental changes in empathic understanding seems conceptually and procedurally flawed and less is understood about this complicated process than the growing number of studies in this area might reasonably lead one to expect. Some clearer understanding of the developmental course of empathic ability would seem to require solutions to the conceptual and methodological dilemma which I have attempted to outline.

Of these, the methodological problems surrounding the explication of the process of empathic understanding seem most amenable to current solution. What seems required, if conclusions are to be drawn regarding the process, as opposed

to the outcome, of empathic judgments is some methodology which permits qualitatively different inferential strategies to be reflected in demonstrably different patterns of response. Two studies in the literature partially satisfy this requirement. The first of these is an early investigation by Burns and Carey (1957) in which three to six year old children were tested to determine whether they could detect incongruities between the facial expressions of various cartoon characters and the affective context in which these characters were depicted. When presented with only contextual cues--for example, a doctor poised over an empty chair with a hypodermic needle in his hand--the youngest as well as the oldest of the subjects tested all agreed that they or anyone else trapped in that situation would very likely be frightened. When shown a similar drawing, however, which included an about-to-be-inoculated child with a large smile on his face, the older, but not the younger of these subjects were able to discount the situational demands of contextual cues and accurately identify the feeling state evidence by the target character. These results were interpreted as indicating that the older subjects employed a more complex inference strategy which permitted them to set aside stereotypic assumptions about their own or others likely reactions, and to attend to the actual facial expression worn by the target characters.

More recently, Greenspan, Barenboim and Chandler (1974) reported a related study in which first and third grade subjects were presented one of two brief videotapes, both of which depicted a central character being badly beaten in a test of strength. In one of these tapes, this character's admission of defeat was accompanied by appropriate affect expression, whereas in the second, he behaved incongruously and appeared pleased or amused by his own failure. The younger of the subjects tested with these materials seemed to overlook the incongruous information presented, regularly based their judgments on contextual cues, and expressed confidence in the accuracy of their judgments, despite the

contradictions presented. The older subjects, by contrast, were sensitive to the incongruities present in the second tape, recognized the central character's affective expressions for what they were, were reluctant to hazard inferences about the emotional meaning of these events, and expressed a great deal of uncertainty about their judgments.

Both of these studies underscore the important role which stimulus complexity plays in determining the manner in which empathic judgments are formed, and help to expose critical differences in the inferential strategies employed by children of different ages. Without the introduction of more internally complex stimulus situations which permitted multivariate inference strategies to be distinguished from highly centered, univariate solutions, an observer would be left with the mistaken impression that the youngest and oldest of the subjects of these two studies employed inference strategies and evidenced empathic processes which were quantitatively and qualitatively identical. The more difficult problems are those surrounding the current conceptual confusion over the role which a subject's own feelings should play in the definition of empathic understanding. As I have tried to indicate, any definition which demands a match between the affective experience of both subject and object leaves open the possibility that projection and not empathy is responsible for the accurate judgments observed. Having artificially disassembled people's thoughts and feelings no directions seem available to instruct us as to how all of these pieces should be put back in place. Even the pieces seem resistant to study. Other than self-report measures, which are notoriously unreliable in this age group of interest, there does not seem to be, at the present time, any convincing method of determining the manner in which persons are touched or moved by their understanding of others. The repeated questioning of the subject's own feelings following the serial presentation of numerous brief caricatures of human emotion (i.e. Mood, Johnson, and Shantz, 1973) for example, seems to be a somewhat artificial and dubious procedure, which may

well obligate a subject to make claims for a level of personal involvement or emotional responsitivity which does not seem to be warranted by the task.

If one is genuinely interested in the extent to which children are moved by or become involved in the distress of others, it will probably be necessary to examine their efforts to understand emotional events which are sufficiently real and sufficiently weighty as to deserve a response which has a measurable depth of feeling. Whether such an assessment situation can be created without exposing subjects to real risks or hazards, whether such situations could be set up in a usual laboratory context, or whether they could be presented in the serial fashion required by conventional measurement strategies is not clear. With or without procedural solutions to these assessment problems, however, it is probably still the case that some measure of emotional insulation separates even the most empathic of persons from others, and convincing measures of empathic understanding will probably require the presentation of events which warrant such concern.

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